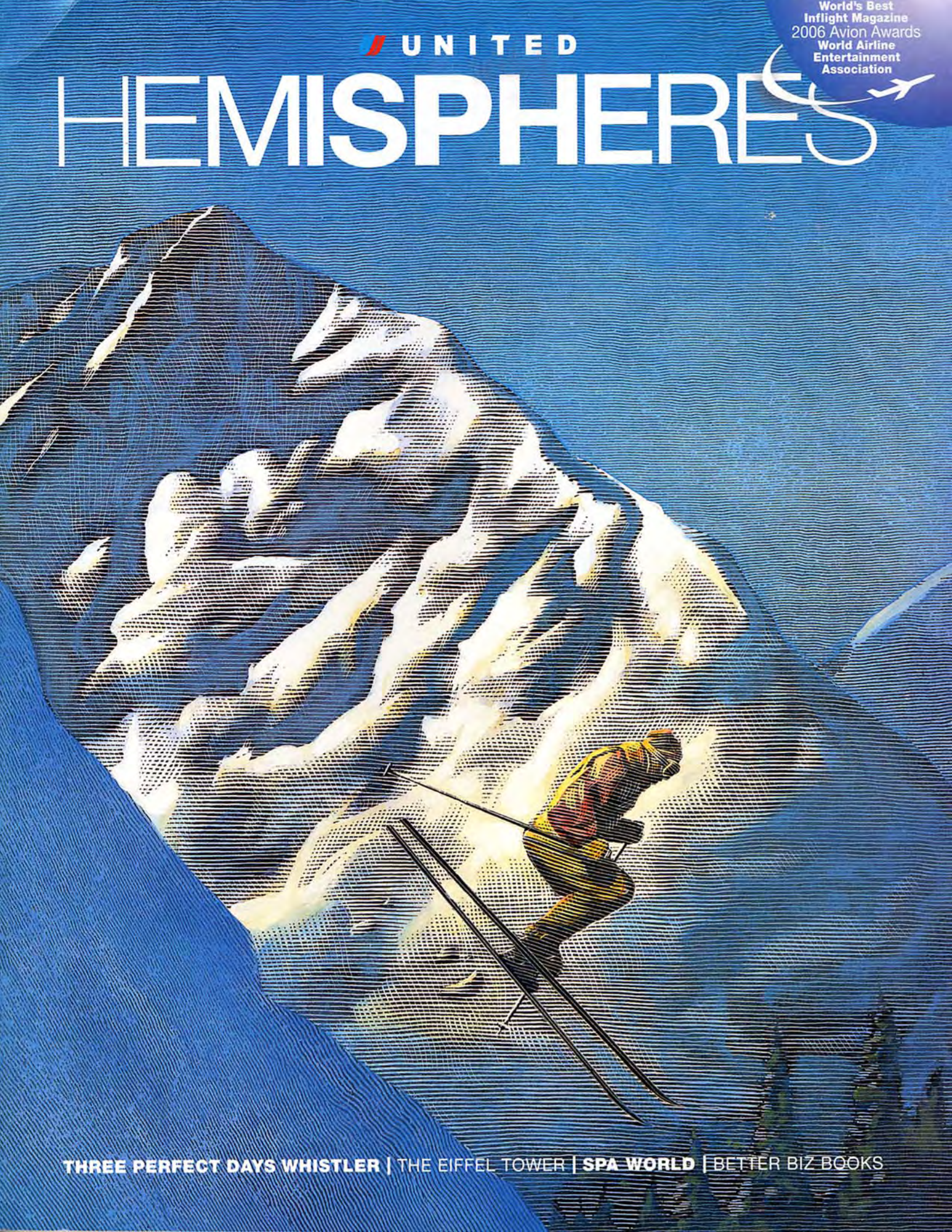
UNITED

HEMISPHERES

World's Best Inflight Magazine
2006 Avion Awards
World Airline Entertainment Association

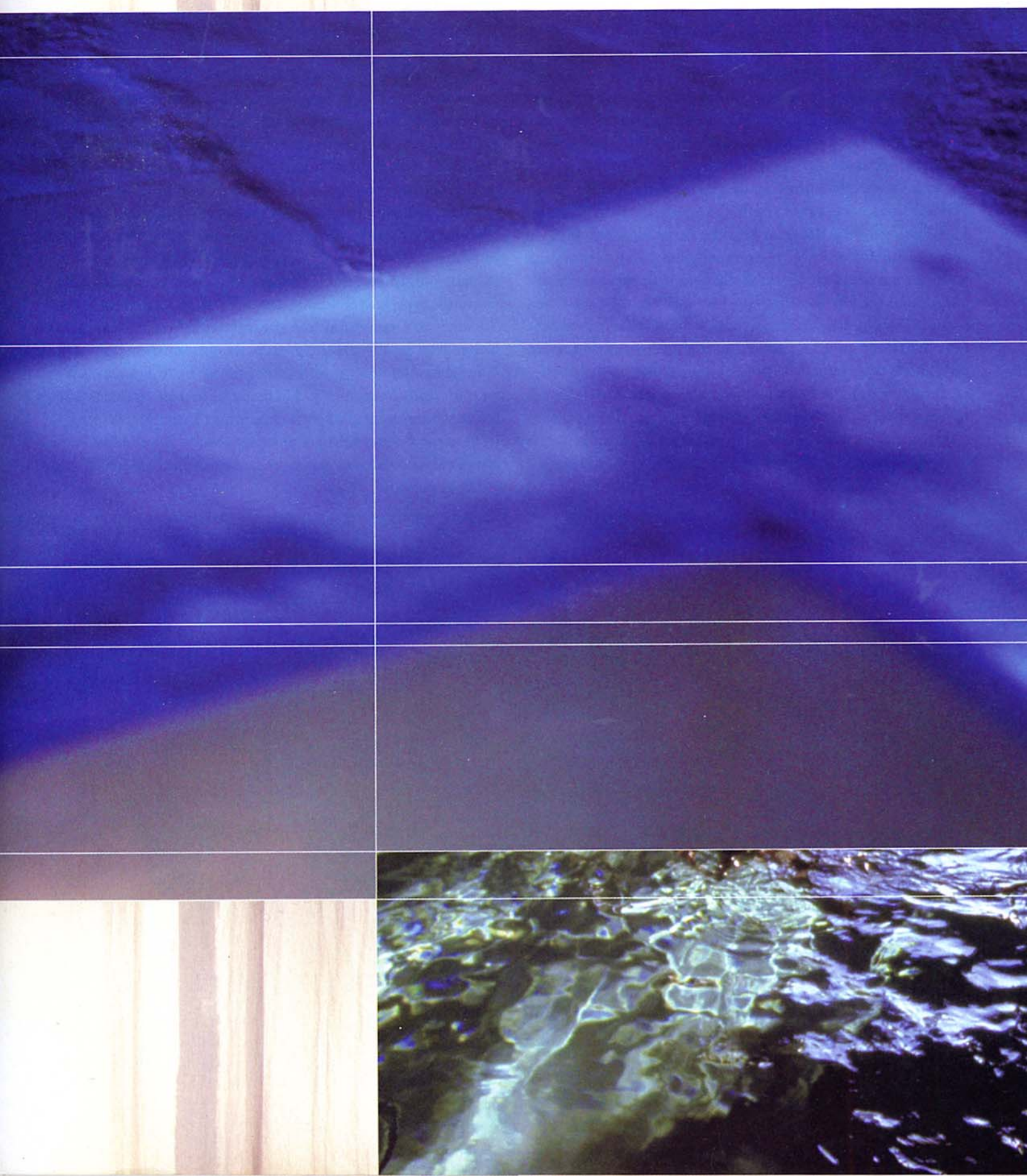


THREE PERFECT DAYS WHISTLER | THE EIFFEL TOWER | **SPA WORLD** | BETTER BIZ BOOKS

spa world

An emerging global sensibility in spa design is inviting people to transcend their surroundings.

by Montieth M. Illingworth



UTTER THE WORD *SPA* TO JUST ABOUT ANYONE—MANY women and more and more men—and you can see the mind become transported to some idealized place. Then come the spa stories. The massage in the beach cabana amidst the scent of spices and freshly cut flowers. The vast, airy space with muted sunlight filtering in through muslin curtains. Floating in steamy water in a dimly lit grotto, the sulfur smells stinging. The nearly out-of-body experience, a separation from the physical, something more spiritual than sensory.

Call it spa world. It's deeply personal and surprisingly diverse. There are thermal spas, resort spas, wellness and medical spas, day spas, destination spas, thalasso spas, and, perhaps most familiar, hotel spas. It's a big and growing spa world out there. According to a 2004 study conducted by the International Spa Association, there were 12,100 spas in the U.S. alone at the time, with the number increasing about 12 percent a year.

What's pushing this growth? The first impulse is to answer "the demand for treatments." But the spa experience has as much to do with place as it does with the treatment itself; it's about being enticed and transported by one's surroundings, by architecture that deepens the experience. An office building or museum, no matter how daring, can't do this the way a spa can. That's because spas are personal and sensory. They're designed with pleasure in mind; feeling, sight, and sound are primary.

Such themes no doubt will intrigue the industry's leading professionals at the International Spa Association's annual conference, scheduled this year for November 6–9 in Las Vegas. Leaders who are pushing the frontiers of spa design are after far more than instilling nice memories. They want to create extraordinary, compelling environments that lend themselves to physical, even spiritual, transformation.

Clodagh in Gaelic means "deep, dark river," and it's also the name of an Irish-born, New York–based spa designer crowned the "diva of minimalism." She calls her approach "total design"; others have called it "Zen luxury."

"I don't think about design but about the experience of a place, what you take away with you," says Clodagh, whose commitment to using only one name is both a clever piece of branding and an expression of her minimalism. She explores the "emotional archeology" of her clients, she says, "to discover what feeds their souls." She sees herself as a travel guide "helping them to take the path they truly want to take."

Quick to smile and laugh, Clodagh derives joy from her work, and when she discusses her accomplishments or those of others she admires, you know she is striving for something beyond. Consider Sasanqua on Kiawah Island, South Carolina, a private club and one of her signature creations. Situated on a peninsula, the spa is approached from a foot bridge leading toward the angular, stucco-covered building. The lobby's scheme of soft, earthy colors echoes the marshland around the property. There are bluestone floors, small stone fountains, and a long corridor with sunlight flowing in between horizontal slats in cypress-wood windows. Moving from space to space seems key to the atmosphere.

PHOTOGRAPHY / PAGES 76–77 (EXCEPT TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM RIGHT), NICOLE KATANO

(clockwise from upper left) Clodagh's White Horses Spa in Ireland and Sasanqua in South Carolina; Les Sources de Caudalie in France

Every step is an opportunity for meditative thought. "I see it as uplifting and clearing the mind," she says.

Similar themes can be seen in her other work, including the Spa de Seville in Auckland, New Zealand, and the Nemacolin Woodlands Resort in Farmington, Pennsylvania. Nemacolin, like Sasanqua, speaks of intimacy—through its integration with the surrounding wooded mountains and through the materials and colors that Clodagh chose. An abundance of glass captures an indoor/outdoor feel. Lamps are shaped like leaves, and the granite in the whirlpools suggests earth and moss.

When I ask which designs inspire her now, she responds easily. No competitiveness here, just respect. There's the Samas Spa at the Park Hotel Kenmare in Kerry, Ireland ("lots of glass, a glowing, green roof"), the Banyan Tree in the Westin Shanghai ("a sense of ceremony, a beautiful spa"), and the Setai in South Beach, Miami ("a festive layer of materials and Asian calm, which is quite a trick to inject in South Beach"). Clodagh's Spa at Golden Eye, now being built in Jamaica, exemplifies the frontiers she's pushing toward. It will rely on the therapeutic virtues of seawater, also known as thalasso therapy. "I think the use of water will become more important in spa design going forward," Clodagh says, "but also healing through energy, or reiki, and sound healing."

In talking about how treatments will affect the future spa environment, she suggests that the designer's job is to divine needs that people are not even conscious of until they're someplace where it feels right to express them. The challenge in that is knowing when people are ready to push their own limits, to experience something different and, potentially, transforming. That knowledge requires having a finger on the pulse of cultural shifts.

Robert D. Henry, an architect also based in New York, envisions the design frontier for spas. "Is there a more spiritual architecture, something that brings together mind, body, and spirit? Yes, certainly," he says. He's heading there by following three principles: first, by creating environments that integrate all the senses; second, by creating an episodic journey through contrasting spaces (small and intimate; large and dimly lit; and bright, angular, and curved); and third, by learning from the stylized Kabuki and Noh forms of traditional Japanese theater. "The support elements in a spa should not distract the patron from the main experience," Henry says. "That includes the location and movements of the staff and even the sounds of mechanical infrastructure."

Henry, who along with Julie D. Taylor cowrote the book *Spa: The Sensuous Experience*, has designed and visited spas across the world and has had hundreds of treatments to refine his design sensibilities. He finds Therme Vals in Graubünden, Switzerland, particularly inspiring. Seemingly carved out of the mountainside and made of local Valser gray quartzite stone, it is monastic in feel, almost severely minimalist. Inside, geometric, cavelike spaces are linked together. "You go from private areas to public ones, from

PHOTOGRAPHY / BELOW LEFT: DAN BIBB

(clockwise from left) Ajune in New York City, by Robert D. Henry; Daintree in Far North Queensland; Espa at the g hotel in Ireland

light to dark, with views of the mountains, warm water to cool," says Henry. "It's very moving."

His book is a tour of similarly moving designs. Blue Lagoon in Keflavik, Iceland, is angular and minimalist, evoking traditional European medical spas, which went out of fashion but are making a comeback. The Japanese version is Takaragawa Onsen in Gumma province, a locale more than 1,000 years old. The mineral-rich water here has long been deemed therapeutic. But it's the exterior spaces that inspire a quiet awe—the outdoor baths surrounded by stone lanterns and statues, a templelike "flying roof" structure straddling a river, all in a mountainous pine forest.

Henry's book shows that Les Sources de Caudalie in the French wine country of Bordeaux integrates European and Asian influences with vast, open, airy interior spaces and plenty of light. Rajvilas in northwest India is housed in a fortlike building, counterbalanced by design themes of softness (pink-plaster structures), nature (flowers and birds painted in murals), and acres of pools and fountains.

Then there's the Daintree Eco Lodge and Spa in Far North Queensland, Australia. Eschewing structure completely, it seems, this spa blends with nature and appropriates elements of the indigenous KuKu Yalanji culture. Elevated villas sit on stilts and are connected by skyway boardwalks. Structure is incidental to the surroundings. It's almost anti-architecture. "How can you compete with nature?" Henry says. Indeed, he finds the natural world supremely appealing. "In tandem with the digital age, we need to shut off the speed of connection sometimes and return to what quality of life is," he says.

The book reveals that the diverse world of spas is getting smaller and evolving toward a common, global spa-design culture. Susan Harmsworth, the founder and CEO of Espa International in London, says she isn't sure that a common aesthetic has yet emerged but *is* sure what it would require. Harmsworth, whose company manages spa design and construction, with a specialty in spas at five-star hotels, is engaged in 65 projects around the world. "You have to understand all cultures and honor them," she says. "You can't be parochial. Sensuality is something you have to understand and empathize with. You must have a commitment to being organic and achieving physical and spiritual fulfillment and wellness." Harmsworth's most important criterion? "You have to be a user. Spa designers have to feel it, so I encourage them to have treatments."

Harmsworth recruits architects who have never done spas before, such as Norman Foster, who designed the Millennium Bridge in London and the new Hearst headquarters in New York. "I'm looking for a different, lateral approach, and that means finding someone who has a clear philosophy, an architecture with a design view," Harmsworth says. Others in that category, she says, include Antonio Citteria of Milan, who created the city's Bulgari Hotel, Jean Michel Gathy of Denniston International, who was responsible for the Setai in Miami, and Douglas Wallace, who designed Espa at the g hotel in Galway, Ireland.

(clockwise from upper left) Blue Lagoon in Iceland; Reethi Rah in the Maldives; Espa at the g hotel in Ireland

Home *Sweet* Spa

Homeowners have been souping up their bathrooms with spa features for years. Now, that sensibility is moving to the next level.

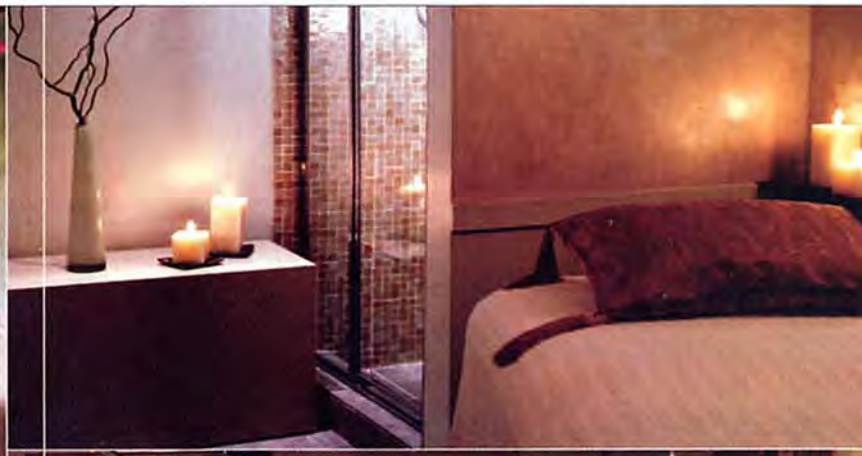
- **Robert Henry designed** a lakeside home for an Orlando couple who wanted to go beyond the "spa residence." A spa-bath connects to a roof deck, which also serves as a yoga space. The house has interior and exterior relaxation lounges, and outside, an infinity-edge lap pool is paired with a reflective pool, which links the house to the lake. Poolside cabanas are used for massages. Henry also is working with **Canyon Ranch** to design a 67-story "wellness tower" in Chicago. This will be the first urban version of the company's combined hotel/residence/wellness concept.
- **The Caledonia, a condo** being built in New York's Chelsea area, has interior **designs by Clodagh.** She is blending technology and primitive materials with feng shui to create a "residential refuge." The lobby will have a reflecting pool and a fireplace library. Each home will have one of the designer's signature spa bathrooms. "Nature is healing, so I work to bring the outside indoors in the form of plants, light, water, and air," Clodagh says.

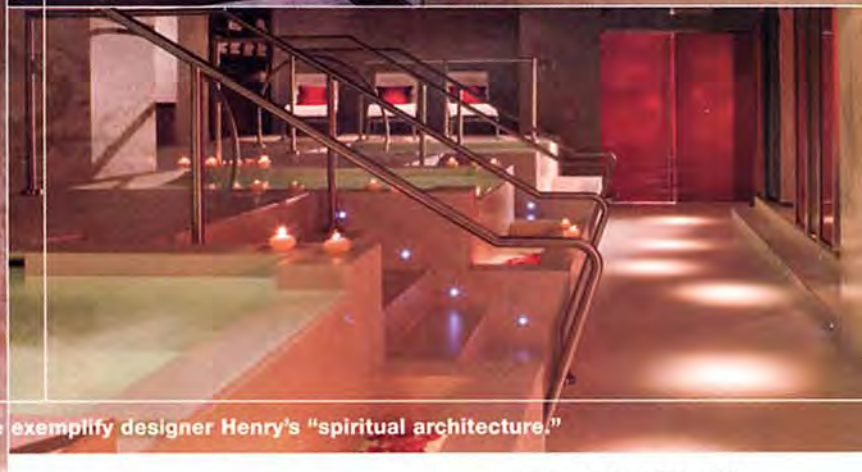
And the spas that she considers transformational? Harmsworth focuses on only one, Reethi Rah, a destination spa in the Maldives that's part of the One & Only collection of resorts. Many spas in developed countries and urban centers—especially those in hotels—seem to be wrestling down the demons of hectic contemporary life, sometimes working too hard to tap into that inner place. They have to work hard, of course, because their clients often show up with just a few hours or days and a very focused agenda—a demand, almost—to be changed, renewed, made better. But at isolated Reethi Rah, where design strikes a perfect balance with the natural world, you feel as if you are visiting a king at a remote mini-palace. It literally commands the visitor to leave the stress at home, perhaps thousands of miles away. Reethi Rah makes the visitor go deeper and embark on a journey to a journey. Reethi Rah, in fact, does offer a variety of "wellness journeys" with a hint of philosophy embodied in its Ayurvedic treatments, personalized rituals intended to create physical and spiritual balance.

A treatment? Yes, these are treatments, but what's intriguing is the notion of ritual, which is as old as civilization. Beyond combining global trends through physical design, spas have perhaps become a re-creation of those psychic spaces, lost long ago, where ritual takes us on journeys of self-discovery and transformation. It seems that those of us most immersed in this modern world want that ritual back. Now there's no lack of places to find it.

Montieth M. Illingworth *would like to spend more time in the world's great spas but usually settles for the odd visit to a yoga retreat near his Westchester, New York, home. His last story for* HEMISPHERES, *"Frank Lloyd Wright in Japan," was named best historical travel article in 2005 by the North American Travel Journalists Association.*

PHOTOGRAPHY / BELOW AND BOTTOM RIGHT: MICHAEL GRIMM; TOP RIGHT: DAN BIBB





(above and lower right) G Spa in Boston and (upper right) Ajune exemplify designer Henry's "spiritual architecture."